

***The Iowa Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) Alumni Survey –  
Measuring Success One Student at a Time***

By Mike Williams and Cyndi Chen

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## **Background**

The Iowa Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), modeled after the California YLF, was established in 1999 by the State of Iowa Department of Human Rights, Division of Persons with Disabilities (DPWD). A grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provided funding for formal training in Washington D.C. One staff person and one volunteer were trained in 1999 and the volunteer has consistently maintained involvement with the YLF. The partnership with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS) and Iowa Department for the Blind (Blind) has remain strong in last seven years. The main tenets of the California model that Iowa YLF has used since inception are:

- Develop an appreciation of the past.
- Develop an understanding of the present.
- Develop a belief in the future.
- Students with every kind of disability (as defined in the Americans with Disabilities Act) are invited to participate.
- Every participant must have a disability and have demonstrated the potential to be a community leader.
- To the extent possible, delegates include an equal number of male and female participants.
- Every role model and guest presenter that the delegates encounter must have a disability. The curriculum reflects a variety of disabilities.

To this end, and with unparalleled commitment and support from the partners, The DPWD has provided an annual program specifically for students with disabilities focused on transition.

The goal of YLF is to engage young people who have disabilities and who will:

- Become employed and self-sufficient;
- Be knowledgeable about resources available to become successful adults; and
- Be exposed to professionals with disabilities who are recognized leaders and role models.

This five-day leadership training program provides youth the opportunity to:

- Share information on career and post secondary education choice;
- Learn the history of the ADA and how they can use the ADA to advocate for themselves;
- Discover the culture of disability;

- Experience assistive technology designed to enhance independence;
- Identify barriers to personal and professional success and develop a leadership plan to overcome those barriers;
- Interact with peers who have similar hopes and dreams;
- Interact with role models who have disabilities;
- Tour the State Capitol and interact with state leaders;
- Meet community leaders with disabilities;
- Listen to speakers on a variety of transition topics; and
- Develop a "Personal Leadership Plan."

Statewide at least 30 high school junior and senior students, with any disability, are selected to participate in this life-changing forum.

### **About the Survey**

Improving Transition Outcomes (ITO), a project funded by ODEP to improve employment and education transition outcomes for youth with disabilities through the use of intermediaries, initiated discussion with Iowa YLF Program Director Mike Williams on the value of a follow-up survey with alumni of the YLF program in regard to employment, education, follow through with their Personal Leadership Plan, civic involvement, if they established relationships with others as mentors or mentees and the usefulness of the YLF resources and tools.

The survey was developed in the spring of 2004, conducted that summer, and completed that fall. It was distributed electronically and interns followed up via telephone contact and U.S. mail. ITO provided funding for follow up and data entry and DPWD provided facilities and supervision of the interns. Cyndi Chen, Data Analyst with ITO, developed the survey, provided technical support, and analyzed survey results.

### **Highlights of Survey Results**

- One hundred and thirty-five (135) surveys were sent and 105 were returned for a 78% return rate.
- Thirty-two percent (32%) or 34 alumni returned as staff. This is indicative of the number of years the forum has been repeated and the age of those able to return that exemplify success in college, employment, and other post high school successes.
- Almost 50% of alumni (age group 18 to 26) were living independently.
- Two-third (2/3) identified their disability as mild.
- Just over 50% were IVRS or Blind clients.
- Four (4) respondents (4%) were still in high school and the remaining 101 respondents (96%) had either a GED or high school diploma; exceeding the

Iowa average of 89.2% (Condition of Education 2004, Iowa Department of Education).

- Sixty-three percent (63%) of YLF alumni had attained a degree or were still enrolled in college which is greater than the national statistics (Compared to 53% for students with disabilities and 64% for those without disabilities nationally; National Center for Educational Statistics).
- Alumni rated resources and skills learned at YLF such as analysis of strengths and weaknesses/career and education options/personal and career goals very high. Examples of a few of their personal and career goals are: helping others, being a friend, to be really good at something, go to college, get a job, live and work independently, self sufficiency, work hard, volunteer, and better money skills.
- Family and friends were most important to them.
- Ninety-six percent (96%) was satisfied with their life thus far which is much higher than the finding (34%) in the 2004 National Organization on Disability (NOD) Harris Survey.
- Eight-six percent (86%) believed their quality of life was getting better. None of them felt their quality of life was getting worse.
- Eighty-two percent (82%) felt they were in good health.
- Ninety-five percent (95%) knew about the ADA and 85% believed it makes their life better.
- Eighty-five percent (85%) socialized with close friends, relatives, or neighbors at least twice a month compared to 79% in 2004 NOD Harris Survey.
- Fifty-seven percent (57%) went to a restaurant at least twice a month.
- Seventy-one percent (71%) went to a place of worship at least once a month much higher than the 49% in 2004 NOD Harris Survey.
- Seventeen percent (17%) was still fairly isolated as far as taking part in groups or community functions. Reasons for not being involved were: don't really know why, choose not to, no access to the function or event, no worthwhile leadership activity available, limited activities, health, no motivation, and busy. Some activities that they did take part in were: band, choir, chorus, dance, sports, theater, camp counselor, New Choices – organization for mentally disabled, Goodwill, Adopt-A-Grandparent, ChildServe, Life on The Road, Mermaid, YMCA, community youth group, senior citizen center, arboretum, Very Special Artists & board, Alliance for Disability Awareness, Amnesty International, Color Me Human, Historical Society, National Honor Society, human rights organizations, ISEA, Boy Scouts, Special Olympics, ROTC, First Responder, Learning Disabilities Mentoring Program, Commission of Persons with Disabilities, MCYL, Opportunity Village in Clear Lake, Iowa and South Dakota YLFs.
- Almost 50% still did not feel they were fully participating in work, school, housework or other activities due to their disability.
- Twenty-four percent (24%) identified transportation as the number one reason for non-participation which is lower than the 31% from 2004 NOD Harris Survey. Of the above, solutions included: getting a van that can hold an electric wheelchair, with extensive adaptation; getting rides from family

members or somebody else through networking; having an affordable, reliable and more frequent public transportation system with longer hours; overcoming the fear of driving, learning how to drive and get driver's license.

- Twenty-nine percent (29%) had mentors and 26% were mentors.
- Forty percent (40%) responded that they had been discriminated against due to their disability. 36% were given less responsibility, 31% paid less, 21% refused job, 19% refused job interviews, 14% were denied accommodations.
- Eighty-eight percent (88%) preferred to work; however, of the 88% who preferred to work, 40% of those (or 35% of total) were not currently working because: can't find job I can do well, disability & health, seasonal jobs, don't know what to do, lost job, going to school, haven't started voc rehab yet, job market, no interest, look for employment, moving, no responses from applications, no time, on the waiting list at disability center, self-employed, stay at home mom, in a band, transportation problems, volunteering, and enrolled in work experience program.
- Sixty-five percent (65%) are employed, compared to 35% in 2004 NOD Harris Survey; roughly ½ full time and ½ part-time. 6% were making \$20,000 or more annually and 35% had benefits.
- Eighty-two percent (82%) was satisfied with their jobs. Some of the reasons were: allowed to be creative; allowed to help people with similar disabilities; allowed to be a student and have a part time job; where I need to be; be able to use skills, knowledge and resource; better work experience than other jobs; enjoy doing it; fits into schedule; gets to be what I want to be; good benefits; good job; good pay; got to have a job to survive; great work environment; helps me to open (with other people); help people; it's a challenge; it's fun; it's what I could do; just like it; know everybody; learning experience; like amount of work, the atmosphere and helping clients, the hours; like the job; like the pace; like the people I work with: friendly, fun, very accommodating, feel comfortable; like working around and visiting with people; like working outside, hard labor; location is convenient; meets current needs; need 40 hour per week job plus benefits; nice co-workers; own the business; supervisors, co-workers, customers are good to me and helpful; treated like everyone else; very fulfilling; work with friends.
- Ninety-seven percent (97%) said the YLF experience was important to them.

## **Use of Survey Results**

Overall, the survey gave us a good look at how well the Iowa Youth Leadership Forum prepared students for transition. With their expanded knowledge of the ADA, strong desire and high expectation for employment, optimistic views towards themselves and their futures, nearing 100% high school graduation rate, and strong inclination for secondary education, the YLF is certainly a substantial tool towards successful transition to employment and education for youth with disabilities in Iowa. Currently the survey is under consideration by several other

YLF states and along with the pre- and post-testing instrument may become a national model.

Lessons learned from the survey results:

- The Personal Leadership Plan needs to be emphasized even more. Alumni responses indicated that the leadership plan was most helpful 1-2 years after YLF when barriers and discrimination became more evident.
- Employment should be a possible answer for the survey question about what is important. Current answers are family, friends, health, education, etc.
- Per ITO, an emphasis should be placed on providing more information on apprenticeship programs, One-Stop centers, and the Occupational Information Network (O\*Net).

Another positive outcome of the YLF was the start up of the Iowa College Leadership forum (CLF). The first CLF took place in the summer of 2004 and was a success. This forum, an extension of YLF, is an immersion weekend focused on the ADA, writing cover letters and resumes, and most specially interviewing for a job the youth desires. We anticipate 20-30 college students will attend the second, 2005 Iowa CLF. The YLF and CLF are presented in partnership by Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Iowa Department for the Blind, Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa State University, and the Iowa Division of Persons with Disabilities.